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ABSTRACT

A study examined how to increase active participation in a language arts class, based on the belief that such an increase would lead to better test scores and better learning. Subjects included a class of 30 homogeneously grouped accelerated sixth grade students, which meets five days a week for 90-minute periods. During the study, the class was regrouped using cooperative learning groups. Results indicated that: (1) cooperative learning groups could be used to teach language arts effectively; (2) working in such groups promotes active participation in class; (3) there is a direct correlation between the increases in test scores and active class participation; (4) students feel they learn more when working in cooperative learning groups; and (5) students were more willing to assume a leadership role when only a few students were involved. Findings suggest that cooperative learning groups work to increase active participation and lessen the competition between students. Further research should determine whether cooperative learning will result in higher test scores when used with a heterogeneously mixed group. (EF)

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ACTION RESEARCH REPORT

Action Research Report
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Procedures and Evaluation in Research
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Section I: Background And Context Of The Study

The action research took place in a homogeneously grouped sixth grade language arts class. The thirty students in the class achieved 82% or better on the Terrenova test administered in May 2000. These students are considered to be the accelerated group. The ratio of boys to girls in the class is one to one. They were, with the exception of four students, grouped together in fifth grade. Many in the group are competitive. They openly display their need to achieve the highest grade or give the best answer. They also tend to need immediate feedback and show their frustration easily.

The group meets five days a week for one hour and thirty minute periods. During this time the students are instructed in reading, spelling, and grammar. The approach is integrated, however much of the time is spent on reading skills with spelling receiving the least amount of instruction time.

For convenience the students began the year side by side in self-selected rows of two. Interaction was tolerated, but not encouraged. Within the first two weeks of school it became apparent that there were about six students who were the first to raise their hands for discussion. These students were willing to express their ideas in front of their peers. The rest of the students would answer when called upon, but their answers were always safe, taken from the book, or done for homework the night before. These quieter students would not challenge the opinions of their peers. Even after being reminded repeatedly that there was no right answer, just opinions that could be substantiated, the majority of the class remained silent. The majority of the class seemed content to be led by the dominant students. However these dominant students were not content to be led by each

other. They were competitive. It became obvious that active class participation was limited at best. Rewards were offered as behavior modification. These worked, but there was no carry over to the class when the rewards were taken away.

The problem faced by the researcher was how to increase active participation in the language arts class, believing that such an increase in active class participation would lead to an increase in test and quiz scores, and ultimately learning.

A review of the literature (Hamison, 2000) showed two possible reasons for this lack of active class participation. The first possible answer was the size of the class. The literature indicates those classes with less than 20 students are friendlier. Students in these classes have a better opportunity to form positive relationships with their peers. These relationships foster a security that makes it more likely that the students will become active participants in the learning process.

Since decreasing the class size was impossible, another approach was necessary. The literature (Johnson, D.W., & Johnson R. 1988, Winter) also suggested that grouping within the group, by using cooperative learning groups, could eliminate some of the competition and help to improve peer interpersonal relationships. This improvement in interpersonal relationships should lead to more active participation, which should result in more learning. This was the approach chosen by the researcher.

Section II: Findings Of The Study

The action research began on Monday, October 30, 2000. When the students entered the room they were assigned to a cooperative learning group for the week. The dominant students were each assigned to a different group. The class was told that they would be

trying something different for a few weeks. Next group rules were established; the students chose group leaders for the day, and daily worksheets were distributed.

In four of the six groups the dominant students were chosen as the leader and immediately took control. In the other two groups the dominant student was not chosen as the leader; however, that student did take control of the discussion. After about ten minutes of discussion, increasing story test scores was established as the goal for the week. Each group was asked to make a list of three ways this goal could be achieved. The items on this list would be used to establish daily goals.

The reading skill lesson was taught and practice pages were assigned. The spelling words were introduced and unit work assigned. Students were quiet and attentive during both lessons. However, when the grammar skill, complex sentences was introduced, the atmosphere changed. This concept, which was new and difficult, caused a stir that could easily be heard. Questions were being asked in the groups but not directed at the teacher. The lesson continued to closure. The homework was assigned.

It was at this point the teacher let each group work on their own and circulated to help where needed. Every group went to work quickly on the grammar assignment. The groups with the dominant student leaders were noisier than the other two groups, however most of their group discussions concerned dependent and independent clauses. In the two remaining groups the work was being done independently with little group interaction.

All groups went right to the reading skill pages next, although the teacher gave no order of assignments. In the reading activity the group dynamics were the same with

only four of the six groups having active participation. In the other two groups, students worked on the reading, but they did not interact with each other.

About ten minutes prior to the end of class, the students were asked to stop working. This proved to be difficult for the active learners. They continued to discuss the practice pages for about another three minutes until they were asked again to stop. For the two less active groups there was no problem stopping the activity.

The class was closed with a summation of the skills. The groups were asked to fill out their group sheets for the day and think about how they would organize themselves for the next day. They were reminded that the rules said they must choose a new leader for the group. The class left still talking about dependent and independent clauses.

The next day followed the same routine, choosing a group leader, setting of daily goals, subject area lessons. The reading assignment included reading a story. Normally this was done silently. However today, one group got their chairs and moved to the back corner of the room. The other groups looked at the teacher and waited for a reaction. Seeing no sign of disapproval, all but one group found spots in the room and began quietly reading the story orally. The last group stayed in place with each student reading the story silently. When story questions were assigned, the groups stayed in their positions and began working quietly.

The groups were called back into place for grammar. They reorganized quickly. The lesson presented was a follow up on complex sentences. The group showed a much clearer understanding of the concept. When the assignment was given, there was general discussion in all the six groups, and although there were new group leaders, the dominant personalities took control. There was more interaction in all groups with students

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comparing their completed work. Even the less vocal students participated in this exchange.

By the third day the students came in and began what had been accepted as the new routine. Group leaders were chosen and goals set with no prompting from the teacher. There was still one group with little interaction. The problem seemed to be lack of leadership. The one child who was usually quite vocal in the traditional setting would not assume the leadership role in the smaller group. The students in this group worked quietly and stayed on task. About halfway through the period there was a subtle shift in the activity of the group. Two pairs emerged, while the other student worked independently. The students changed seats so that they were sitting next to their partner, leaving the independent worker at the end of the set.

When oral discussion of the story questions began, there was more activity than normal. The same few vocal students began the discussion, but others questioned them, even members of their own group. Since it was the ideas of the group that were being discussed, everyone felt safe. At one point one of the usually more quiet students told his group spokesman, "That's not what we said!" After a brief exchange the group position was altered to reflect the ideas of the entire group.

The next day the class was given the series story test. This was done in the usual manner and took about fifteen minutes. With the exception of two students, both of whom were in the nonactive group, test scores stayed the same or increased by at least ten points.

The next cycle began with the reorganization of the groups. Again the dominant students were separated. Special attention was also given to those students who were part

of the nonactive group. These students were also separated. The groups were asked to select their leader for the day and to begin to formulate a goal for the week.

Tests from the last story were returned while the groups were discussing their new goal. The students immediately noticed the increase in scores. They wanted to make reading scores their goal for this week as well. However, with a little help from the teacher they began to realize that they already had some strategies for improving reading scores and that they could do the same thing in another area. After some discussion the class agreed that increasing spelling scores was the goal for the week.

The reading lesson was presented. There was little discussion. When spelling was introduced a period of about 5 minutes was given to list ideas on how to achieve the goal for the week. All groups actively participated in this activity. It was noticed that the normally dominant students were less vocal. They still expressed their ideas and opinions, but they were not the leaders of any group. When called back to task, the groups remained unsettled. They did not focus well, nor did they did they do well when the grammar lesson on abstract nouns was presented.

At the end of the reading, spelling, and grammar lessons the students were given time to work on the assignments for the day. Four out of the six groups went right to spelling. One group went to reading, the other to grammar.

On the second day of the cycle subjects were presented in the normal order. Groups moved quietly to read the story orally. The story was discussed without prompting from the teacher. All groups moved. All groups interacted. As soon as the reading activities were complete, students moved into spelling activities.

The spelling activities varied by group. There was some pair testing within the groups and some oral suggestions given to help memorize words. One group discussed the rules used to form plurals that applied to the spelling words. The students did this on their own, without direction by the teacher. As time progressed, there was even interaction between the groups. All this was done in a surprisingly quiet and orderly manner.

When it was time to change to grammar, there was resistance by the students. Students seemed intent on exploring the spelling strategies they had devised. They did settle for the grammar lesson after they were told they would have time to come back to spelling.

The grammar lesson was presented with little interaction. The objective for the day was achieved, and the homework was assigned. Three of the six groups went right back to spelling while the others worked quickly to finish the grammar before they started spelling again.

Day four of the cycle began with the series story test. Students then read an enrichment story. Their assignment was to create group story questions for exchange the next day. Interestingly, the groups did not move to read this story, nor did they read it orally. They simply did the task as presented. They did discuss the story and did write the questions.

Once the class moved into spelling, the activity increased. The groups got noisy and had to be called back to task. They were distracted. Their work did not appear to be constructive or productive. The class was reminded of the test tomorrow and of the goal they had set for themselves. After about five more minutes, the class switched to the grammar lesson, which lasted until the end of the period.

On the last day of the cycle, the class asked to have the spelling test first. This was done. Papers were exchanged, and marked. There was much interest in the scores of the group, not just the individual scores. Again the test scores rose for the majority of the students.

The last research cycle was started on November 27, 2000. The students entered the room asking about the new groups. They wanted to pick their own groups, and although the teacher had already organized new groups, the students were allowed to do so. The groups organized themselves along boy/girl lines, with six of the dominant personalities being concentrated in two of the six groups.

The class went through the now established routine. They chose a group leader and decided to set grammar score increases as their goal for the week. The groups were much chattier. They had more difficulty staying on task and did not seem to be focused on the weekly or daily goals. The subjects were presented in the normal sequence. Through out the reading and spelling portion of the class, students had to be reminded to stay on task. They were disruptive and talked among themselves during the lessons. This behavior was especially true of the groups that included the dominant personalities.

When the class got to the grammar lesson, possessive nouns, they did settle, but only after being reminded of how well they had done on the other two goals. They were actively involved in the lesson. They volunteered examples and brainstormed ways to remember the rules for making possessives. There was little reluctance to answer questions, and most of the students seemed to stay on task.

Each day of the last cycle started with a very high noise level. There was much less focus by the students, and they had to be repeatedly called back to the task at hand.

While there was an increase in test scores, one would wonder if this increase was due to prior knowledge or current instruction and/or group work.

The research clearly showed that cooperative learning groups could be used to teach language arts effectively. It also showed that working in such groups promotes active participation in class. By looking at the test and quiz scores and the field journal one can see a direct correlation between the increase in test scores and the increase in active class participation. Student interviews and class survey sheets show that an overwhelming majority of the students feel they learn more when working in cooperative learning groups. With the exception of one student, the class thought cooperative learning groups offered them a chance for immediate feedback, which they could not get in the traditional setting. They surveys also indicated that students are more willing to ask questions and share their ideas in the group setting. They also indicated that students were more willing to assume the leadership role when only a few students were involved.

Competition between the students lessened as the research progressed. Groups were concerned with their ability to raise their own group scores and rarely compared scores outside the group. More dominant students, as well as brighter students, served as teacher in the groups, which may have lessened the need of these students to be the best at some skill, or to have their opinion or answer validated by the teacher. More research would have to be done to see if this theory holds true.

Section III: Reflection

As a teacher I am committed to the children I teach I want them to learn to their fullest potential. I believe that different children learn in different ways, and that it is my job to find the teaching style that fits their needs. When I began the action research, I felt sure

from reviewing the literature that active class participation would increase by using cooperative learning groups. I believed that this teaching style would reach some of the students I had not been able to motivate. However, I was in no way prepared for the transformation in my classroom. I saw children who seldom spoke in the traditional setting assume the role of leadership. I saw quiz and test scores rise, not because extra time and/or effort was given by the teacher to a particular subject, but due to the active participation in the cooperative learning groups. Students formed new friendships and interdependencies. The learning became cooperative, rather than competitive.

This transformation was not without its problems. I normally have a quiet, well-organized, well-structured classroom. During the research project, the room was still organized, however the structure was much different and the noise level was much higher. The class took control of their own activities, and this was difficult for me to accept. At times I felt like an intruder in my own classroom. The students had set their own goals and found their own ways to achieve them. Once I had taught a given skill I simply became the resource person to use when all else failed.

I found the students very willing to share their ideas and concerns about group work with each other, but unwilling to share them with me. Many were uncomfortable with my questions and said very little. However, when asked to express their feelings anonymously, they did so without hesitation. They said they learned more from group work. They also said the groups should have no more than four or five members. And that the teacher should pick the members in the group, since sometimes kids just talk when they are with their friends. These were some of the same conclusions drawn by the teacher.

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Until the time of this research I had used cooperative learning groups, but not for an extended period of time or to achieve long term goals. They were used for science experiments or to fill out study guides, and rarely lasted for more than one period. Having done this research, I can see that cooperative learning groups do increase active class participation and learning. They can be used in any area, as long as rules are established, goals are agreed upon. These groups create new alliances, raise test scores, and seem to create a self-confidence that carries over into the larger instruction group.

For the groups to be truly effective the teacher must be careful when assigning members. Personalities, friendships, and past achievement must be taken into consideration. The teacher must be flexible where noise level and movement are concerned and be willing to take a more passive role in the class. Group rules and goals must be jointly established prior to the beginning of work for by doing so, the teacher gives the students limited control over their learning. This action causes a partnership where both parties have a vested interest in the outcome of the activity and allows active participation and learning to take place.

Section IV: Recommendations

The findings of the research has led me to believe that cooperative learning groups work to increase active participation and lessen the competition between students. However, what is still uncertain is whether or not cooperative learning will achieve the same results of raising test scores when used with a heterogeneously mixed group. I would like to try to duplicate the findings with such a group.

I will continue to use cooperative learning groups in the language arts class. However, I will be more careful in the selection of groups and the nature of the activity. I

will allow the students more say in how and when these groups will be used. I will also try grouping within the learning groups for some activities, for as the students showed me the only limits cooperative learning groups have are the limits, which are imposed upon them.

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